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Feel the rhythm: Developing language through rhythm and rhyme

February 21st, 2018 By [Vicki Stephens](#)

Singing, rhyming, oral storytelling, and reading aloud are essential to helping children learn a language, along with the listening and concentration skills essential for brain development and memory.

Oral language interactions build children's understanding of the meaning of a larger number of words, and of the world around them. This understanding is crucial to their later reading comprehension, and literacy in general. Early language skills also predict later academic achievement and success in adult life.

— [Extending their language — expanding their world](#) (pdf, 1.7KB), Education Review Office (ERO) report, February 2017



Marariki storylines by Christchurch City Libraries. CC BY-NC 2.0

The power of rhythm and rhyme

Dr Seuss wrote, “The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go.” It wasn't simply his words and wisdom that were important, it was also the rhyme.

Singing, rhyming, and storytelling are part of every culture. By singing and rhyming to children, parents and caregivers are not only keeping traditions alive, they are teaching children to articulate words, practice the pitch, volume and rhythm of their native language, and develop the listening and concentration skills essential for brain development and memory.

Music, in addition to supporting all areas of child development (intellectual, social and emotional, motor, language, and overall literacy), helps the body and mind work together to learn the sounds and meanings of words in a fun and interactive way.

The repetition of words teaches children to anticipate the rhyming word and this, in turn, prepares them to make predictions when they read, as Mem Fox said:

Experts in literacy and child development have discovered that if children know eight nursery rhymes by heart by the time they're four years old, they're usually among the best readers by the time they're eight.
— *Reading Magic*, Mem Fox (2001)

An area of national concern

It's true that the greatest gift you can give a child is time. But in an increasingly busy, online, and device-driven society, more and more children are starting school with less oral language interaction in addition to hearing or language issues, which are not being diagnosed early enough. This, in turn, limits the child's vocabulary and therefore their ability to communicate and have more meaningful social interactions and engage in their learning.

In their February 2017 report *Extending their language — expanding their world*, ERO identified the lack of language development in children as an area of national concern. "In New Zealand, Van Hees reports that an increasing number of 5 and 6-year-olds have difficulty expressing ideas fluently and coherently in oral English. This impacts on their ability to participate fully in the classroom."

The report, which focused on children's oral language from birth to 8 years, looked critically at what early learning services were doing in response. It highlights the first 2 to 3 years of a child's life as being critical in terms of the rapid language development that takes place during this time. It also looked at what some early learning centres and schools are doing to support oral language learning and development but acknowledged that, as yet, it is not a formal and intentional part of the curriculum or teaching programmes.

ERO findings

The ERO's findings gathered from 176 early learning services and 104 schools identified common themes in supportive and effective early learning services and schools as follows:

Early learning centres

"In the services that were strongly focused on supporting children's learning:

- teachers had in-depth knowledge of every child and a shared understanding of oral language learning and development
- leaders and teachers worked in partnership with parents and whānau and with external agencies and specialist support where necessary
- their curriculum was highly supportive of children's oral language learning and development
- evaluation, inquiry and monitoring processes were driven by the need to promote and support children's oral language learning and development."

Primary schools

"There were common themes in the way the most effective primary schools supported students' oral language learning and development. These included:

- transition-to-school programmes through which information was shared about oral language learning and development (including any strengths and needs)
- both formal assessment and informal daily monitoring of oral language progress of all learners, particularly in the early months after starting school
- explicit oral language learning expectations were developed as part of school-wide progressions
- daily literacy programmes with a strong oral language focus
- identifying students needing additional support early and responding appropriately."

Identifying speech and hearing issues

The report also highlights the need for awareness of the child and identifying any speech or hearing issues, which may be hindering development of language. To aid parents, caregivers, and teachers, ERO recommends the use of Much more than words, a user-friendly document to help identify children's speech and hearing issues and encourages adults 'to take up the challenge' of developing children's communication skills.

For teachers, there is also Learning through talk, a resource that suggests ways of helping students become effective thinkers and communicators.

Key elements for language development success from the ERO report included the importance of:

- services to work together with family and whānau to understand and to encourage both verbal and non-verbal communication styles in children
- early diagnosis and intervention — students given a strong foundation will accelerate later
- allowing more time for students to articulate a response
- learning through play
- reading aloud and using nursery rhymes to support speech development
- parents and teachers modelling reading aloud and book talking.

Kōrero (conversation) is the best way to help children learn

Every key element for language development listed above highlights the importance of communication and interaction with the child. In the recently updated Te whāriki a te kōhanga reo and te whāriki: Early childhood curriculum, language is seen as a vital part of communication and as one of the major cultural tasks for children to develop competence in. Language does not consist only of words, sentences, and stories, but includes the language of images, art, dance, drama, mathematics, movement, rhythm, and music (p. 27).

In response to the report, the Ministry of Education has developed [resources to support oral language and learning](#) for parents, schools, and early childhood centres, including a downloadable parent's brochure and oral language poster.

Reports and words aside, change also requires adults to become more mindful in their communication, the development of strong [home-school partnerships](#) and time off from devices.

How to support children's language development with rhythm and rhyme

Share a book

[Getting to know read-alouds](#) — information and resources to help you find a 'read-aloud' that you and your students will enjoy.

[50 of the best rhyming books for kids.](#)

[Rhyming activities](#) from *The imagination tree*.

[Songs, rhymes and finger plays: An activity guide for under-fives \(pdf, 2.5KB\)](#) — fun activities in English and te reo Māori by Sport NZ.

Play

[The central importance of play](#) from *The imagination tree*.

Sing

[Rhymes for children](#) — a YouTube selection.

[Waiata tamariki](#) — songs in te reo Māori for children.

Take a class

[Public libraries](#) throughout the country offer [Wriggle & Rhyme](#) sessions for babies and toddlers and their parents/caregivers of babies and toddlers.

[Baby rhyme](#) — resources from Christchurch City Libraries.

[Wriggle & Rhyme](#) — a YouTube video of active movement for early learning from Auckland City Libraries.

Find out more

[Reading aloud](#) — Services to Schools' guide with tips and strategies for reading aloud.

[Reading at home](#) — ideas and tips for reading at home.

[Why talking with young children matters](#) — a *Creating readers* blog post about the Talking Matters summit held in Auckland in 2017.

[Children and music: Benefits of music in child development](#) —from Bright Horizons Organisation. A good article which includes links to further research as well as resources.

[Rhymers are readers: The importance of nursery rhymes](#) — a child development programme developed by KBYU Eleven Organisation.

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